

**North Hunterdon-Voorhees
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**Ann Marie Rose
Director of Special Services**

TO: Honorable Members of the State Board of Education

FROM: Ann Marie Rose with Input from a Representative Group of
Hunterdon County Special Education Administrators

RE: New Jersey's Alternate Proficiency Assessment for Students with Severe
Disabilities

DATE: February 21, 2007

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the Alternate Proficiency Assessment (APA). My submission includes input from a group of special education administrators of Hunterdon County.

Concerns:

Assessment Period -

Standardized testing for students without disabilities is conducted over a relatively short period of time (four days). The APA is structured as a four month assessment which is excessive when compared to the standardized testing.

Scoring Requirements -

The requirements for student performance in the APA process go beyond the core curriculum content standards. The students' APA portfolios are scored in depth in the following areas: social interaction, self-determination, generalization, independence, connection to standards and student progress. These requirements far exceed the proficiency expectations for students without disabilities.

Portfolio Development -

The APA requires construction of a student portfolio documenting various pieces of evidence over the four month period of time. Documentation may include student data sheets, charts, work samples, pictures, videos, etc. Construction of the portfolio requires staff to respond to criteria set forth in the process for assembly and presentation. These requirements are disproportionate, and the physical construction of the portfolio may impact negatively on student scores, which is

Additionally, the staff training for APA portfolio development places much emphasis on staff “cheating” during the APA process. The importance of this process and the training communication has some teachers worrying over many details including ensuring that students are not wearing the same articles of clothing in different picture documentation for the APA.

Portfolio Scoring Subjectivity –

Student portfolios are scored by panels of teachers who are trained in a scoring rubric. There exists a level of subjectivity in scoring impacted by the perception/judgment of the teachers hired to score the portfolios. There is clear evidence as to the subjectivity of the APA in the widely varied scores students have received for like details in different students’ APA portfolios. There exists a frustration among school district staff striving to follow the APA process while experiencing a lack of response from department staff to explain such scoring discrepancies. The penalization of students with disabilities for a process that is not standardized is objectionable. Additionally for a student to receive full credit for progress, it appears the student must move from total lack of knowledge (zero) to a 90% score. For students with the most severe disabilities, this is an unrealistic progress expectation. It is clear that the APA process as it is currently structured is not reliable.

Creation of “Evidence Environments”

The APA requires staff to gather evidence solely for the purpose of meeting the APA portfolio requirements. Where natural instructional environments already exist in quality community based instructional programs, staff members are now required to pause to gather evidence in the way of pictures, creation of charts, evidence descriptions, etc. These requirements take teachers’ valuable time away from students and impose a restructuring of programs. Additionally some public environments do not allow for picture taking. A specific example of this is two different shopping malls advising school staff that taking of student pictures performing natural activities was not allowed on the mall premises.

Financial and Instructional Time Impacts –

Construction of student portfolios over the four month assessment period requires much use of talented teachers’ time to verify appropriateness of evidence documentation, to describe evidence and to construct the portfolios. This requires districts to take action to arrange APA imposed “teacher time.” Many districts hire substitute teachers allowing for release of staff to work on the APA process. Teachers are often given an extra free period during the day for APA paperwork/planning. Beyond the fiscal expense for substitute teachers is the more important realization that the process “robs” students of quality instructional time with their regular teaching staff.

Conflict in IEP Team Decision Making –

In some circumstances, students are challenged with very severe levels of disabilities (medically, cognitively, etc.) and their IEPs may not be targeting the very specifically required APA skills of interaction with non-disabled peers, generalizing skills, independence, etc. This results in a conflict in the delivery of instruction for some students with disabilities. Is the New Jersey model for the APA indicating the IEP team must follow a model of instruction required by the APA? This appears in conflict with the requirements of IDEA.

Recommendations:

1. Reduce the excessive scoring requirements of the APA. Eliminating the excessive requirements should reduce some areas of subjectivity in scoring. A focus on student performance relative to the core curriculum content standards and relative to the severity of the student's disability should be considered. It is important that increments of progress for some students must be recognized as significant relative to the disability.
2. Evaluate options for flexibility in standardized assessments of students with disabilities. Consider use of standardized assessments for students at their functional grade level targeting skills consistent with students' IEPs.
3. Create a committee to review models utilized in other states to identify more student centered/appropriate options for implementation in New Jersey.